

12 Digesting ‘cryptid’ snakes

A phenomenological approach to the mythic and cosmogenetic properties of serpent hallucinations

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Introduction

Ancient mythological stories about extraordinary snake-beings are recounted in nearly every culture in the world (Willis 1990), which prompts the questions: What is it about snakes that make them such ubiquitous mythic tropes? Why is it that snakes consistently represent remarkableness? And, furthermore, why do phenomenal snakes with anthropomorphic abilities persist as potent signifiers in a range of cultural contexts today? With increasing numbers of people choosing to pay to experience the company of cryptid snakes in hallucinatory form, this chapter considers the contemporary significance, the tenacity, and the value of snakes through unpacking the coalesced meanings embedded in, and embodied, by snakes as they merge with human bodies. Using Damasio’s (2000) ideas concerning the neurobiological purpose of emotions, ‘snake’ is revealed to be a sign that provokes specific physical sensations (feelings) with a view to integrate, ingest or ‘stomach’ the existentially troubling and socially important complex idea-visions that humans find difficult to digest.

Accounting for snakes in myths

Myths are stories that explain the unexplainable. They have been described as ideological mechanisms that out-picture cognitive structures, as metaphorical, sacred narratives, euphemistic, allegorical (Campbell 1991), truths (Eliade 1963) and as ‘logical models to overcome contradiction’ (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 443). Their fantastic content renders impossible feats (e.g. shape-shifting) possible, normalising the enigmatic and demonstrating solutions for existential risks by pushing on the boundaries of what is achievable. Myths open up thinking to new possibilities, suggesting there are greater alternatives to what we know, that rules can be broken and that differences exist. Mythscapes are lands of opportunity and vision, but why do so many snakes inhabit this land?

Interdisciplinary scholarship agrees that snakes make attractive candidates for mythology as they lie ‘deep in the human subconscious’ (Stutesman 2005: 9) from where they provoke a troubling mental mix of fascination and trepidation (Dexter 2010; LoBue and Deloache 2011). For Wagner, snakes pour

themselves into the 'dark crawlspace of the unconscious' (2009: 6) where they aggravate anxieties. For both Wagner and Stutesman snakes evoke a heady mixture of fear-provoking powers (Wagner 2009; Stutesman 2005). Consequently serpentine cryptids embody perplexing and paradoxically complex assemblages of oppositional associations that circulate existential forces of creation and destruction (Dexter 2010; Stutesman 2005).

For Isbell (2009), on the other hand, any deep-rooted feelings about snakes are linked to snakes being our original predators. She claims that *ophidio-phobia* (fear of snakes), which is present in all primates, has an evolutionary basis connected to our shared fruit-eating, arboreal pasts. Respect for the empirical reality of snakes, stimulated by their obvious ability to harm, could be the evolutionary precursor for the pervasiveness of snakes in myth but I wonder if this adequately accounts for the extraordinarily extensive exemplification of the serpent as a silently powerful, knowledgeable, clandestine, cosmogenetic force that is depicted in so many ancient and now modern cosmological stories (Bernard, this volume; Dannaway 2009; Lee 2007; Nicolaus 2011). Fear-of and reverence-for can, and do, accompany each other, but the phenomenological experience of snakes as a linear 'path' (Drower 1937: 37), or directional pointer, to knowing existential truths also needs explanation. It suggests that humans not only think snakes are remarkable; they *feel* they are remarkable too.

For symbolologists Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), the material form of a snake and its particular aptitudes may hold some answers. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996) speak of snakes as a 'living line' – their simplicity of form allows for endless transformations and potentials. Their morphology places snakes, like the cryptozoological entities explored in the other chapters, as consistently liminal. For example, snakes are not obviously male or female, they have no legs, wings or fins, yet have been seen to fly and can inhabit virtually any environment; they stare unblinking; have forked tongues (to smell with!); are surprisingly strong, swallowing large prey whole; they can digest all types of matter without problem and they lay eggs (Stutesman 2005). In short, snakes challenge our sense of order and taxonomy and so perhaps epitomise the cognitive discomfort that Douglas believed derived from 'matter out of place' (2002). However, the anomalous *pièce de résistance* must surely be the snake's ability to apparently overcome death or at least prompt the illusion of rebirth by periodically shedding its skin. This process renders the snake visually haunting as the skin turns a ghostly opaque and the colour of the snake's eyes change too (Stutesman 2005). The ability to be reborn has no doubt fired humanity's imagination with most heat. It hints at a chthonic, theriomorphic aspect of immortal gods.

Incorporating snakes

Snake mythology repeats a number of key themes. Typically stories play with themes of creation but other, recurring patterns are also apparent. Of

particular interest is the notion that snake and human are inextricably entangled. Characteristically, this is presented through fantastic shape-shifting abilities, but, also, through the physical incorporation of snakes into the human body or vice versa (in spiritual or material form). These representations imply that incorporation enables knowledge (snake wisdom) to be assimilated or ingested and integrated into human flesh (see Lee 2007). Through the interweaving strands of ingestion and digestion then, emerge entangled correspondences between the knower and knowing, and eating. The connection between the acts of eating, digesting and assimilating and the processes of knowing and absorbing new ideas places the snake as conduit or mechanism that joins knowledge and knowing in the body; a position that suggests the feeling of 'snake-ness' is associated with the absorption and incorporation of ideas perhaps otherwise too problematic to grasp or digest.

These themes are evident in numerous accounts. For example, members of the Hopi nation Snake Clan claim snakes as inextricably (even genetically) intertwined with humanity as the clan emerged through the union of a female snake and human male. The story asserts that, as a result of an underground search for water, a man found a community of snake people, one of whom he married. Unfortunately, the woman eventually returned to her home underground leaving their children above ground with their father. Humanity's embodied union with snake-ness in this Hopi myth reveals connections between the body and chthonic knowledge (Tyler 1964; see also Bernard, this volume).

An alternative understanding of the notion of snake as kin can be found amongst the many indigenous groups who live in southern Africa. Here various beliefs state that a snake lives within humanity as an invisible interior force named *Nyoka* (or *Nyowa*). *Nyoka's* existence is thought of as a central and controlling force within humankind. As such the human and snake are one semi-symbiotic being (Green 2004). It is widely believed that illness emerges from the discontent of the inner snake (Green 2004). According to this ontology, illness is the measure of human disrespect for materiality and is provoked when the snake recognises poor practice (Green 2004). Thus *Nyoka*, this inner snake, acts as moral compass and reminder that control is out of our hands whilst still being in our bodies. Snakes hold further significance for the South African Zulu *Isangoma* or healer/diviner. In addition to invisibly live within us, visible snakes are thought to embody the spirits of ancestors (Hambley 1931; Houle 2011; see also Bernard, this volume).

Cartesian dualities that see differences between the material and the spiritual have troubled the human mind since before the Enlightenment. The power of stories about snakes seems to come in part as an attempt to fuse these dualisms in the snake, showing its corporeality as simultaneously representative of both physical and the spiritual. Eire (2009) explains how the recurring cyclic depiction of the snake devouring itself (*ouroboros*) works with elegant simplicity to symbolise the snake's oneness by creating a singularity that describes the ungraspable sense of eternity that humans wrangle with. Eire maintains it was

this that prompted Jung to suggest *ouroboros* as a central archetype for the human psyche (Eire 2009: 29). For Nicolaus (2011), on the other hand, it is the snake's elongation that suggests eternity. For other traditions this eternal cosmogenic creativity (Stutesman 2005) is represented in different ways: Shesha the Hindu cosmic serpent of eternity with 1,000 heads (Narby 1999); Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent (Stutesman 2005); an abundance of Nordic snake goddesses, gods, witches, and world serpents as cosmic guardians (Mandt 2000); the Amazonian Barsana's ancestral anaconda that births humanity from its belly (Hugh Jones 1988; Reichel Dolmatoff 1990) and the Tukano's mythological snake person (Reichel Dolmatoff 1996) amongst others.

Another recurring theme is that of the snake as 'knower'. The snake's knowledge affords powers to alter life's course (including curatively through healing). Interestingly the theme of knowledge in association with healing is also coupled with consumption. In Christian stories for example, the snake challenges God's authority, claiming similar powers are available to all once ingestion of particular substances has occurred. There are numerous biblical references to snakes, but the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2) is arguably the most well known. Here the snake is pictured as villainous, using humanity's curiosity and naivety to entice them out of their paradisiacal bondage with God and into the snake's material world of personal choice. Again the human condition is reliant on a relationship with a snake, this time in association with knowledge that was originally withheld from humanity. The snake tantalises with its claim to know, promising knowledge will bring individual power. Instead, tasting knowledge proves fatal, creating the ultimate form of change – death. The snake tempts, the Bible warns, because knowledge turns out to be undesirable; it transpires that if you know, you will also suffer. Be warned, this story asserts. Don't provoke change, stay in place and change will be abated. Thus, ignorance affords permanent stability, and according to this part of the Christian story, that is paradise. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* also claims the snake stole immortality from humanity through eating. In this role reversal, the snake takes knowledge from humanity by eating a flower before the human can. It is this action that forces the burden of mortality onto the human species.

The Brothers Grimm story 'The White Snake' (1812) overturns the previous narrative to illustrate how ingesting snakes offers great power. In this story, a king's wisdom results from regular meals of snake: 'nothing ... [is] ... hidden from him, and it seemed as if ... secret things were brought to him through the air' (Grimm and Grimm 2007: 83).

The snake's ability to moult extends the circulating themes of bodies and immortality to healing. Here we can see the shedding of body parts as suggestive of the snake's ability to cheat death, and resultantly prompts inferences of healing capabilities. To heal is also to change in repair; a reversion back to what was, rather than a destruction of what is. It is easy to see why this transformational process can be perceived as miraculous; the motivation of life to continue itself; the ability of life to know how to reform itself evokes

thoughts of higher powers and life's mysteries. To fully peel off one's skin without blood or pain is a radical, fundamental alteration, comparable but also in sharp contrast to death as it replenishes and rejuvenates rather than terminates. This notion of snake as transforming healer is visible in numerous other forms. For example, the caduceus, the widely used symbol of the serpents wrapped around the staff of Hermes, signifies the sacred serpents of the priests of the cult of Asclepius, that healed injuries by licking them (Retief and Cilliers 2006).

The examples above reveal that, across cultures, the snake signifies power, creativity, realisation and transformation. Traditional stories commonly represent the snake as an all-powerful being with the ability to facilitate rebirth via the special knowledge it holds. But what of the modern interpretations associated with the idea of a snake? How do these ancient ideas translate in the minds of the modern human raised in industrialised settings and shaped by science? The following ethnographic example reveals the notion of 'snake-ness' to be as influential and as valuable a symbol now as it ever was.

Hallucinating snakes

Increasing numbers of people from industrialised nations are travelling to South America in search of the wisdom provided by cryptid snakes. These snakes promise personal healing, self-knowledge and appear as hallucinations, occurring in association with the ritual consumption of a pan-Amerindian decoction named Ayahuasca. Accounts state that communicating with the hallucinations that Ayahuasca induces provides valuable, even life-altering information (Harner 1992; Jenkins pers. comm.; McKenna and McKenna 1994; Pinchbeck 2002; Wilcox 2004).

Typing 'Ayahuasca holiday' into a search engine brings up hundreds of thousands of results. The choice of a holiday or 'retreat' that claims to spiritually recharge or cleanse is increasing in popularity (Grunwell 1998; Razam 2009). Such holidays are offered in a variety of different guises – from health spas, and hiking trips, to eco-tribal experiences. An Ayahuasca experience is one such event. The experience challenges the orthodox notion of a desirable holiday as it entails days (even weeks) of vomiting and diarrhoea, accompanied by hallucinations of snakes, sometimes of giant proportions. It is advertised as an experience for those who want to release blockages, to find their potential and to existentially heal via the therapeutic wisdom of the hallucinations.

The wisdom people seek spews forth after ingesting the revolting Ayahuasca brew in association with the guidance of a local practitioner. The main ingredient of the drink is the stem of the plant *Banisteriopsis caapi*: an endemic South American liana which twists and curls up trees, looking like a snake encapsulated in a hardened shell (Narby 1999; Razam 2009; Reichel Dolmatoff 1990; 1996; Wilcox 2004). The ritual process necessary to see the snakes is gruelling and uncomfortable. It can take weeks while seemingly endless consumption of the thick brown liquid is required (Dobkin de Rios 1972a;

1972b; 1973; 1984). The levels of active ingredients in the brew are considered toxic, which leads to purging of the liquid from both ends of the digestive system.¹ Most accounts testify that it is arduous, unpleasant and certainly not recreational, despite this activity having been labelled 'drug tourism' by Dobkin de Rios (1994). These holidays appear to be part of what is now a growing trade that recognises (and capitalises on) the wisdom and experience of indigenous ethnobotanists and their ancient methods of healing. In consequence, these 'magico-religious practices' (McKenna et al. 1998: 73) are inciting investigation into the 'brain/mind interface' (ibid.) because of the perplexing conundrum accompanying the acquisition of what is thought to be wisdom in association with hallucinations.

The ethnographic data I am primarily relying on concerns the Ashaninka of Peru, and comes from a selection of sources: the published work of Narby (1999), Razam (2009), Wilcox (2004) and Weiss (1973) combined with my own experiences and interviews with a number of informants in 2011 (Jenkins; Komaromi) and 2012 (Komaromi; Withers).

Many different Amerindian groups consume Ayahuasca for spiritual and medicinal purposes. As with other ethnographic descriptions there are discrepancies between accounts. For example, Narby's work with the Ashaninka focuses directly on the significance of the snake, suggesting that it is pivotal to consumption. But Dilwyn Jenkins (pers. comm.)² argues that while the snake is significant, the Ashaninka group he lived with claim its importance emerges through the neo-shamanic operations as practised in the *mestizo*.³ This discrepancy does not detract from the fact that increasing numbers of outsiders pay to experience snake knowledge, or as Razam calls it 'snake medicine' (2009: 121) in relationship with the entheogenic properties of the brew.

The snakes experienced vary and seem tailored to individual dispositions. For example, Narby (an academic) was confronted by giant neon twin snakes that furiously hissed about his inconsequentiality (1999: 112). Komaromi, a devout and regular user, has seen friendly snakes rhythmically forming out of the air and the fire. Other accounts talk of vomit turning into rivers of snakes that pour forth from within, or as serpentine women appearing and disappearing seductively out of the matrix that manifests when everything melds together (Razam 2009: 305). My own experience was of a seemingly endless, torrential stream of dark, writhing, knotted snakes discharging through the skin of my belly – disappearing once out and away from my body. The snakes are described as both familiar and overwhelming. They can be majestic or humble as well as singular, multitudinous, terrifying or amusing. And if they talk, they share profundities that people struggle to express after the event. Significantly, the snakes are expected, even waited for, and there can be a sense of disappointment if snakes don't come (Withers, pers. comm.). It is said that you have fallen or let go when the snake arrives, succumbing to the ingredients and experience, and allowing the process to take hold (Withers, pers. comm.). When the snake arrives – in whatever form – she is commonly referred to as the *Madre Ayahuasca*: the mother of all things, and it is whilst in relationship

with her that you can expect to find out more about the reality of your existence (Pinchbeck 2002: 153; Dobkin de Rios 1972a).

I felt faced by Death, ... got nauseous, rushed out and began vomiting, all covered with snakes, like a Snake Seraph, colored serpents in aureole all around my body, I felt like a snake vomiting out the universe.

(Ginsberg recounting his experience with Ayahuasca, in Burroughs and Ginsberg 2006: 60).

Desperately seeking snake wisdom?

To date only a few surveys of participants' motivation have been completed (Wilcox 2004; Winkelman 2005). From their findings it seems clear that the majority feel their hallucinatory experiences bring promise of insight into life's secrets. Winkelman (2005) and Wilcox (2004), and indeed Dobkin de Rios' earlier accounts (1972a and b, 1984), describe participants as seekers who need guidance, feel discontent, have physical or mental ailments that don't respond to allopathic treatments – in short, participants have existential issues to deal with. Whatever the motivation, the recurrent theme of wisdom as spoken or acted out by snakes echoes the conclusions of the traditional snake stories cited earlier.

However, like the biblical serpent, the Ayahuasca snakes' wisdom comes at a price, and we are warned that this journey should not be taken lightly:

It's not a frivolous pursuit ... there's a certain amount of dread attached to taking it – you have a hallucinogenic trip that deals with death and your mortality. So it's quite an ordeal. It's not something you're going to score and have great time on.

(Sting, cited in Dunn 1998: 26)

Such statements remind us that this activity sets participants on a path or arduous passage of discovery where the snake-plant drink demands they surrender to her will. For my informants, a sense of trepidation and a feeling of risk were integral to the experience. Lyng (1990), picking up on the discourse of 'risk society' as explored by Beck (1992), Giddens (1998) and Douglas (1992), suggests that while voluntarily risk-taking appears a paradox of modern life, in fact there are significant personal rewards associated with the survival of risk. He goes further stating not only that people place 'higher value on the *experience* of risk ... [but that risk taking is] ... necessary for the well-being of some people' (Lyng 1990: 852 original emphasis).

The increasing popularity of the process suggests that the participants come away from the experience feeling that the discomfort and any accompanying risk was worth it, as these quotes illustrate:

From my experience it's not like other drugs, not even like mushrooms, yeah? [...] When you take Ayahuasca you can see spirits right in front of

you, you're not being paranoid – they really are there. This whole experience is on a different plane than the physical. It's about healing, not escapism.

(Todd quoted in Razam 2009: 268)

My perpetual suffering is gone. I have less fear and can deal with it better. My anxiety levels are virtually gone.

(Winkelman 2005: 213)

Feeling the discomfort of the snake

So what is going on? To date conclusions have predominantly circled around the psycho-symbolic significances to account for the increasing popularity of the experience. However, investigations tend to focus on the action's efficacy, claiming value to be associated with effects. The conclusions of investigations lie between either of these two broad themes: physiological – that the extreme purging clears parasites out of the body, thus creating a sense of well-being (McKenna et al. 1998; Pinchbeck 2002; Wilcox 2004) or psychological – the hallucinations enable the individual therapeutic insight (inner sight) (Hancock 2005; Narby 1999; Pinchbeck 2002).⁴ The first explanation is convincing, but slightly boring. There is evidence to suggest that purging can indeed successfully reduce parasitic populations (see Hurn 2012 on zoopharmacognosy – animal self medication and purging).⁵ More problematic, however, is the fact that this explanation denies the psychological message or the symbolic communicative content of the experience and relies on the idea that humans must guard their boundaries from invaders – something that Dunn (2011) claims is the destructive obsession of many contemporary humans in industrialised nations. The second explanation is lovely but problematic. It clashes terribly with post-enlightenment scientific positivism and smacks of a hippy mishmash of ideas circling around without being able to successfully land anywhere in this jungle.

For participants, the effects of the experience do not need explanation; indeed to try and do so may detract from the potency of the realisations prompted by the communication of the visuals. Experientially or phenomenologically, the conditions are enough to confirm their 'reality', as Wilcox's description of her first meeting with *Ayahuasca* illustrates.

I surrendered, allowing a kaleidoscope of colour and imagery to blot out my thoughts and feeling. A huge snake appeared, dark but vibrant blue, almost indigo. It seemed much larger than I, although I could see it in its entirety. It undulated up out of the darkness, arching toward me, facing me head-on. Intricate patterns cascaded down its back in shimmering pink, green, yellow and sky blue [...] The snake just stared, alive and conscious but not wanting anything from me. There was just pure 'snakeness' hovering before me. I cannot remember exactly what happened next, but at some point the snake, at least energetically, entered my mouth and slid

down my throat. I vaguely remember the odd sensation of its slithering along my spine.

(Wilcox 2004: 27)

Wilcox describes the outcome of this event as 'exquisite' because she became one with the snake or 'Mother Ayahuasca' (2004: 29). Wilcox's description is rhetorically compelling but still anticipates explanation. According to this representation: what happens, happens – not as a crazy illusion but as an ability to see reality in its genuine fullness. As one of Razam's informant's told him, Ayahuasca is teaching her to see (2009: 221).

As we have seen, the preferred interpretive direction for mythological otherness is psychological. Psychological explanations favour attributing the mechanism and value of events like these as something akin to a therapy session 'triggered by the individual's unconscious' (Razam 2009: 221). One can also assert that it is simply the extraordinary nature of the experience that is enough to account for the increasing popularity of seeking 'snake medicine' (Razam 2009: 121). But what of the regularity and homogeneity of seeing snakes? Should we not also ask what is it about visions of snakes that holds such profound communicative potency for so many different people from various walks of life?

Ashaninkan philosophy and ontology – snakes and the very substance of life

For those indigenous to the Amazon, environmental materialist explanations can account for the appropriateness of snakes and snake symbolism as the practice emerged in an environment inhabited by an abundance of numerous types of snakes. Shamanic practices work in association with animistic ontologies that envision the ecology as animated with inspirited forms. An animistic belief system is reinforced, fortified or perhaps even inspired by the visions engendered by ingesting hallucination-inducing substances. In consequence, consumers maintain that the animated hallucinations they relate with are true and real – the substance reveals a genuine vision of existence (Razam 2009). In this system, the knowledge snakes speak of exists as if within 'everything' and can be accessed on successful penetration of form's boundaries. With the help of skilled shamanic practitioners versed in the art of effective communication, perception alters to facilitate communion with the spiritual world of knowledge.

To understand this better it is necessary to grasp how these ideas work to structure Ashaninka life. In brief, Ashaninka cosmology sees all life as having once been essentially 'human'. For the Ashaninka, what now appear as distinct, different creatures are at root made out of one substance. These similarities differentiated when the great transformer, *Aveiri* (the original state), created forms to represent the variety of characters, traits, abilities and relationships that are possible (Weiss 1973). Life, through this process, was diversified into

discrete, particular chunks or states, and in agreement with a number of other cosmologies, quantum or particle physics and genetic theory, all material life, or 'corporeal diversity' (Viveiros de Castro 2002: 307) is, in truth, one substance, originally undifferentiated and deriving from one place.

In this representation, form is a sign that teaches you about the things you experience (Narby 1999). In other words, morphology is both a visual cue and clue. For the shaman, awareness of shape brings accurate readings, or knowledge of who the thing really is (was), which enables solutions to be extrapolated and exposed. It is these solutions that balance health. Thus shape simultaneously hides commonality but suggests truths (Narby 1999). Here truth and knowledge are joined in a unity that comprises an essence of all things.

The Ashaninka depiction outlined above has many correspondences with other mystical stories that allow types of beings to be interchangeable. Viveiros de Castro says that 'an original state of undifferentiation' is a virtually 'universal Amerindian notion' (2002: 309). He goes on to say that this conceptual perspective inevitably 'reshuffle[s] ... our conceptual schemes' (2002: 307) because assuming a one-ness abandons dualisms and our 'dichotomous heritage' (2002: 308), declaring through 'cosmological transformation' (2002: 308) that the commonality between all things is termed 'humanness', something which carries with it a sense of personhood and agency that can be reached by utilising particular practices. Thus, it follows, 'the common point of reference for all beings ... is not humans as a species but rather humanity as a condition' (Descola 1986: 120, cited in Viveiros de Castro 2002: 309).

Challenges to taxonomic boundaries are common. Tukano beliefs, for example, are a case in point. Neighbours to the Ashaninka and also regular ritualistic consumers of Ayahuasca, the Tukano speak of a 'Snake Person' (Reichel Dolmatoff 1996: 173) who is simultaneously the mother of fish, as well as also being the river (Reichel Dolmatoff 1996: 106, cf. Bernard, this volume). This is a clear example of alternative categorisation that does not trouble over taxonomic distinctions in the same way that other cognitive and epistemological traditions do. When boundaries break down, objects blur and when this happens what might be called 'a snake' through one lens, is also simultaneously other things. Ayahuasca consumption breaks down boundaries as the plant facilitates hallucinations that not only take the form of a snake, but are also animated by the 'person' snake mother, who in accordance with this relational ontology of oneness, is, in essence 'human'.

Such ontologies confront positivistic notions of 'reality' and are commonly rejected as fantastic or allegorical, understood only as naïve representations. Kohn, however contests this, calling for the recognition of 'transspecies intersubjectivity ... [so that the] ... semipermeable membranes that constitute the borders along shifting ontological frontiers' (2007: 7) may be blurred. After living with the Amazonian Runa (a group who also use Ayahuasca), Kohn disputes positioning humans as the legitimate knowers. For Kohn, this amounts to 'cosmological autism' (2007: 9) – a state that fails to recognise the agency or subjectivities of others due to the 'physical discontinuities that separate different

kinds of beings' (2007: 7). He goes further, citing Runa belief, to assert that hallucinogens may be useful to break trans-species communicative boundaries:

Lower [beings] ... can only see the world from the perspective of higher beings via privileged vehicles of communication, such as hallucinogens, which can permit contact among souls of beings inhabiting different ontological realms. Without special vehicles of communication, such as hallucinogens, lower beings understand higher ones only through metaphor – that is, through an idiom that establishes connections at the same time that it differentiates.

(2007: 17)

Kohn argues that we need to allow these other thought forms to inhabit our mental worlds as traditional Amerindian groups do (2007; and see Kohn 2013 for a wider discussion on ontology and translation).

As has been shown, once the serpentine hallucinations created by Ayahuasca are seen, they are not thought of as illusions; they are accepted as real creatures now made visible, creatures who are communicators of truth and holders of knowledge. When knowledge (and truth) is assumed to be communicated through hallucinations, the simple use of a relativist framework, may not be enough (see Sperber 2000). The definition of hallucination describes imagery perceived without form as if external to the viewer. Rationalistic notions of innate knowledge might be able to shelter hallucinations under their wing through neuroscientific notions of abnormal stimulation of the visual cortex, but how do we translate innate knowledge into apparently external, talking, ephemeral beings who recur as serpents of all sizes, colours and moods?

Epistemologically, knowledge contained within or throughout substance is perhaps even harder to conceive of. Narby (1999) wrestled with these problems, paying particular attention to snakes as hallucinations. He chose to take the experience and conclusions he had as factual with the aim of arriving at a direct understanding rather than one that might get lost in translation. In consequence he linked Ashaninka shamanic ideas about form with the forms that he hallucinated whilst influenced by Ayahuasca. After much deliberation he concluded that the shape of the snake is presented as a recurrent theme, not only in these rituals but also in a wide number of cosmological examples across the world, because it is universally significant to all life. As he sees it the snakes reflect knowledge hidden within all life forms, because life's code or message assumes the shape of 'intelligent' inter-twined snakes – our DNA (Narby 1999).

Emotionality, discomfort and snakes

Narby's (1999) claim that snake hallucinations are projections of the microscopic inner 'snakes' that comprise the DNA that motors every living cell is ambitious. It grounds snake hallucinations in flesh, as opposed to illusion. Using his ideas as a springboard, I would like to suggest an alternative, which

links the mentality of representation to the empirical corporeality of snake by using the physiological chemistry of emotions as the communicative medium that makes sense of the impression of 'snake'.

As part of humanity's communication toolbox, cosmologies and myths are used as vehicles to convey particularly dense meanings through the imagery of the fantastic. A story without fantastic imagery can provoke emotional responses, but those with the fantastic manage to stimulate feelings (or a sense) of those grand ontological concepts that remain elusive to successful expression in other methods of discourse. Such stories allow the ideas to settle into the body, where we make *sense* of the inexpressible by having physical sensations about them – awe felt as uneasiness in the stomach, fear that makes us shrink away, happiness that comes as if bursting from the chest. Wonder-filled stories elicit emotional reactions viscerally felt, understood perhaps as a three-dimensional phenomenological picture.

According to Navarro (2008) there are two basic states of being: comfort and discomfort. All responses to life lie on this continuum. We are either comfortable or uncomfortable, or perhaps most commonly somewhere in between, and in a complex chicken-and-egg cycle of stimulus/response our equally complex and not fully understood biochemistry alters homeostatically to rebalance our physicality. Most of this is achieved in the pertinently named 'reptilian' part of our brain (the limbic system) where the amygdala helps to translate basic emotional responses into actions for survival (Maclean 1990; Pert 1997).

Emotions are simultaneously felt and communicated (Damasio 2000). Ekman's work shows that physical sensations (feelings) are directly linked to specific neurochemical pathways activated when a person explains they feel one of a number of states we have named emotions (Ekman 2004).⁶ Accordingly these involuntary corporeal 'movements' mean we 'feel' emotions, or emotions' form, before we know we are feeling them (Damasio 2000; Ekman 2004). In other words, physiological chemistry is active without individual awareness, suggesting human emotional responses are involuntarily and instinctive. Darwin too, in his study on the expression of emotions (1872), unfashionably for the time, linked emotions to physiology. Rather than some sort of disassociated Cartesian idea of emotions as thoughts being located in the mind, Darwin (1872), and more recently Ekman (2004), Damasio (2000) and Pert (1997), claim that emotions are physiological processes that get translated into thought only after they begin to be felt. Pert goes further to state that the body *is* the unconscious mind because, as she sees it, the chemical communication that translates as emotion arises for distribution throughout the physiological nervous system (1997: 141) and does not appear to originate elsewhere. Accordingly, emotionality is not only initially uncontrollable, it is also stimulated by a sensorial cycle that humanity has not yet found a beginning to (Damasio 2000).

Sensations create an empirical awareness of being alive. Milton uses Damasio's work on emotion and feelings to assert that emotions are

‘observable bodily changes’ and feeling is ‘the subjective experience of those changes’ (Milton 2002: 80). This representation proposes *emotions are felt* which need not be contested except to note that while emotions are always felt and culturally judged within the semiotic code they inhabit, feelings may not always be emotional. The difference between feelings and emotions lies in the ‘motivation’ of the sensations (bubbling in the stomach from hunger, heat on the face from the fire, itch in the foot, etc.), these sensational signals are experienced in relationship with environmental conditions – and *might* prompt emotional feelings, but not necessarily. Thus, emotions are sensationally experienced thoughts, while feelings are sensational interactions.

Mythopoetics

Myth works to exploit emotionality too (Lewis 1955), apparently tapping into the most ancient part of the brain in a similar way to intense unusual experience, which the ‘reptile’ in us appears to viscerally, or perhaps without thought (unless thought is chemistry), understand (Pert 1997). Jung explored this internal, non-conscious comprehension in his work with mythology, the psyche and his theory of archetype (1981, 1997). Accordingly, Jung maintained that the psyche, as with physiology, is similarly occupied with homeostatic harmonisation; while physiology regulates bio-physical processes like temperature, the psyche rebalances or regulates meaning so as to maintain a mental equilibrium. Thus, through dreams and myth, a system of classifications craft ideas into socially meaningful entities and philosophies that equalise any destabilising thoughts (Jung 1981).

For Campbell (1991) too, myth’s significance lies in creating balance. Campbell rejects some of Jung’s purely rationalistic stance and places myth as the stability between the inner and outer bodily experiences that being alive demands. Believing that the significance of mythological (or cryptozoological) creatures (and the snake in particular) is connected to the temporality of physical existence, Campbell claims that myths function as mirrors put in place to reflect back who you are in preparation for the two revolving, cohering eternities of new life and new death. New life looks at new death and vice versa, in a cycle of existence. According to Campbell, the serpent not only represents the dynamics of existence but also the bondage of life to time.

For Watts, however, this was not what urges us to mythologise (1989). He maintains that myth attempts to share those indescribable feelings that are, as result of embodiment, experienced alone.

The sensation of ‘I’ as a lonely and isolated center of being is so powerful and commonsensical, and so fundamental to our modes of speech and thought, to our laws and social institutions, that we cannot experience selfhood except as something superficial in the scheme of the universe.

(Watts 1989: 12)

Watts sees the seemingly inevitable conception of self as distinct from other parts of existence as contributing to the construction of mythology. For Watts, being 'isolated "egos" inside bags of skin' (Watts 1989: 9) provokes a tendency to leave aside any '*common sense*' (1989: 9, original emphasis). For Watts, we urge ourselves towards the sense of joining through the emotional responses provoked by myth. In conjunction with this, and by way of illustrating how words construct, he adds that it is a mistake to assert that we come *into* this world, because, in agreement with Ingold (2011) he states 'we come out of it' (Watts 1989: 9).

For Ingold, any notion that humanity exists in separation from the material world is an illusion and a dilemma that needs challenging (2011). In his earlier work, Ingold maintained that myths enable a 'poetic involvement' (2000: 56) with existence that allows the world to 'open out' (2000: 18) and bring other-than-human persons into human lives. This process, far from being a cerebral language based on 'intellectual impulse[s]' à la Lévi-Strauss (1963: 210), is one that works to draw together seemingly disparate physical threads into a meshwork that realises existential material connectivity and similarity, to dissolve the discomfort of separation and difference. Myths allow us to appreciate how the complexities of our shared worlds are interwoven with our more-than-human companions and as such provoke us to come to our senses.

Jung, on the other hand, uses the term archetype to refer to a collective, instinctual memory or inheritance that we all receive as a constituent of corporeality. An archetype is a mode of communication, or a symbolic structure that exists within the psyche as a unit of comprehension and meaning. It is with these templates of meaning that we grasp deep composite complexities, all of which allow us to negotiate the puzzle of existence. Contrary to environmental or materialist ideas, for Jung the meaning of archetypes is not derived from the 'outside'. He maintains that what is 'inside' has 'an *a priori* structure of its own that antedates all conscious experience ... [because] ... The psyche is part of the inmost mystery of life, and it has its own peculiar structure' (1959: 187). His claim directly connects the notion of archetypes with an existential fundamentality that has a non-material reality. This psychic reality, for Jung, is where the shapes of meaning are made, or where form, as an idea, materialises. Thus, as spheres of meaning, archetypes become motivating patterns of imagination from which the organisms or beings with supernatural qualities and abilities in myth can be found. For Jung the creatures and their powers should not be understood as illusions, disassociated imaginings or even interpretations of matter (1959: 187). He suggests that what we call illusions 'may be for the psyche an extremely important life-factor, something as indispensable as oxygen for the body – a psychic actuality of overwhelming significance' (1931: 111). Rather than, for Jung, mythologems, primordial images or archetypes organise not through interpretation or translation of the material world but instead through the out-picturing of shared hard-wired, mental patterns that exist within.

Both Campbell's life dynamics and Jungian archetypes contribute to explaining the intensity and concentration of the sign 'snake' in human culture. The brain's pattern recognition software is an equally convincing position to adopt. However, more convincing might be to link recent neuroscientific findings concerning the invisible chemical pathway of emotions with the human inability to verbally express the visceral nature of feeling and emotionality.

If the snake makes us uncomfortable, it may be used to convey other ideas that are experienced as discomfort, or that are felt to be viscerally indigestible. Stories about fantastic, cryptozoological snakes provoke this kind of gut-moving discomfort. Drinking *Ayahuasca* does the same.

Conclusion

Humans commonly use the idea of snakes to simultaneously epitomise the sinister fear of death and the awesome power of life. The duality of meanings associated with the symbol 'snake' allows snake-ness to easily embody a visceral rather than intellectual sense of eternity along with other emotionally charged existential themes that are difficult to articulate verbally. The multivalent properties associated with the emotionality of the snake increase its value as signifier, making it a key theme in cosmological stories across the world. The ambiguity embedded in mythological snakes is connected to the empirical reality of snakes in association with the attributed characteristics that the snake's form facilitates. The snake's morphological simplicity, along with its seeming ability to cheat death, advertises its potential as supernatural creature with special powers and knowledge.

Mythological stories may not play with fantasies or the fantastic but simply re-present the world using the alternative categorisation of feeling, as if depicting the world as it is felt, rather than as it is thought. The snake's mythological potency is still active in today's post-modern world. The consumption of *Ayahuasca*, in the hope of corresponding with the serpentine mother, is testament to the ongoing power of the sign.

Notes

- 1 For more information on the ritual, see: Narby (1999); Pinchbeck (2002); Razam (2009); Wilcox (2004). Apparently, regular consumption of *Ayahuasca* may acclimatise individuals to the substance and stops the nausea and the snakes. (Komaromi, personal communication, September 2011).
- 2 Dilwyn was interviewed for this research in 2011. More information about his work with the Ashaninka can be found here: www.ecotribal.com
- 3 The *mestizo* is the term used to describe the border settlements made between the jungle and the town. It is here where perhaps traditional ideas have been altered and augmented to create an alternative method for the Western traveller who is in search of some link with traditional wisdom.
- 4 *Ayahuasca* is sometimes called *la purga* (Wilcox 2004: 106) in acknowledgement of its ability to cleanse the body.

- 5 One can see how violent expulsion of stomach and colon contents could dislodge any dwellers, and indeed, investigation shows that substances such as Ayahuasca are anthelmintic. First because they contain harmine, which exhibits significant effects on parasitic populations (Hopp et al. 1976), and second because recent studies (Max et al. 2003) also indicate that substances high in tannin reduce the parasitic burden in farm animals' digestive systems through not only increased intestinal motility but also by killing the parasites themselves. All red wood plants are high in tannin; Ayahuasca is a red wood plant.
- 6 It is important to note that all peoples feel and show these emotions in the same way – the physical experience and communication is identical. However, different cultures will feel angry or afraid, for instance, about different things. Thus there is some cultural difference as to what disgusts or is considered funny, but whatever prompts this, it will always be felt and shown facially in the same way (Ekman 2004).

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